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ABSTRACT

An assessment of the role of women in third world countries and strategies to improve their status are provided for high school global education classes. The document emphasizes that women in rural areas of developing nations are subject to triple oppression: as citizens of underdeveloped countries; as peasants living in the most impoverished and disadvantaged areas of those countries; and as women in male-dominated societies. Change strategies include providing women with financial credit, access to technology, education, management and marketing skills, health and day care services, and women's support groups. A brief case study of a woman in West Africa illustrates the success of these strategies. Ideas for action and a brief list of reference materials are also provided. (KC)

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WOMEN CREATING A NEW WORLD

FACTS FOR ACTION NO. 3

Oct 82

Leslie Tuttle; Haleh Wunder

Oxfam America, Boston, MA

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Facts For Action
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Women Creating a New World

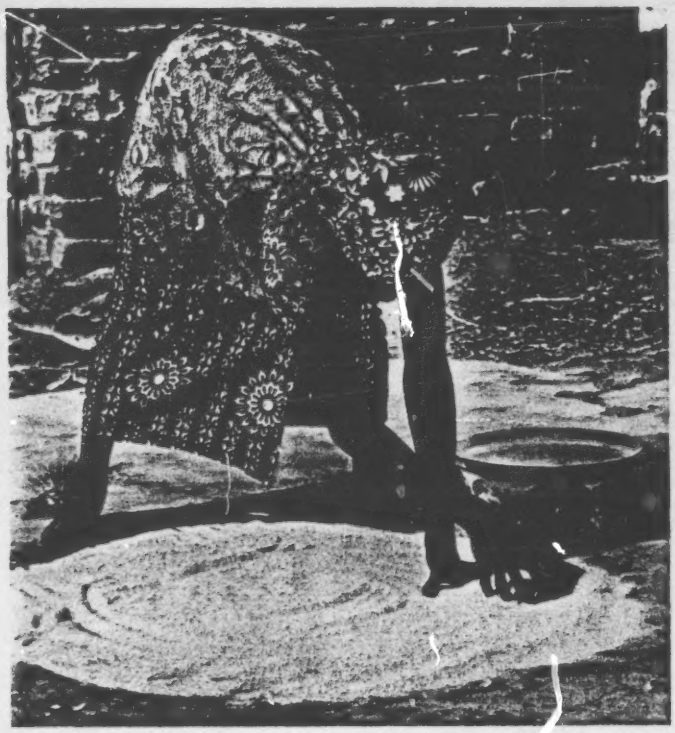
India. Oxfam photo

Gulal lives with her husband, mother-in-law and three small children in a windowless hut in the village of Metala in Gujarat, India. The hut contains 2 cheap aluminum cooking pots, two earthware jugs for water, a quilted mattress and a kerosene lamp. Gulal's family is landless. Her husband earns what he can as the village barber. To supplement his scant income, Gulal and her husband seek work as agricultural laborers for 3 or 4 months each year. She feels fortunate that her husband hasn't left for work elsewhere like so many others in the village.

"I have suffered a lot of my life. I do not want my daughters to suffer like me. We must create new ways of living."

Gulal

Challenged by conditions such as these, a remarkable innovative agency called SEWA — the Self-Employed Women's Association — has initiated a multi-faceted approach to helping rural women improve their lives. With a loan from a revolving fund, Gulal has purchased a dairy buffalo which will assure her a small but steady income and nourishment for her children. Women are also being trained by SEWA in cottage industries which provide an alternative source of income. And SEWA has organized a day care center in Gulal's



Upper Volta, photo by Stan Sherer

village where she can leave her children while attending her training course in carpet weaving. The women also meet to discuss the substandard wages they receive for seasonal agricultural work. A group of them are planning to join with women from two other villages to demand that the minimum legal wage be paid for their labor.

With a loan in her name, day care for her children, sources of income she controls, membership in a dairy cooperative and a group to learn from and grow with, Gulal says, "Now the whole world comes to see us. When they see and talk about all the activities women do, people begin to say "Why don't we start these activities in our village? Why not our women too?"

The world is changing for many poor women in the developing countries who are working together to better their lives.

Oxfam America is concerned about the needs of poor women in the Third World. When our staff and Projects Committee review project proposals from local organizations overseas, one of the questions they ask is "in what ways will this project improve the lives of lower status groups in general, and women in particular?" Indeed, in India and Bangladesh, all of Oxfam America's grants are devoted to projects aimed at meeting the needs of poor women.

Upper Volta, FAO photo

Why do we believe that women are crucial to the development process?

Women comprise 50 percent of the world's population. In developing countries around the world, women head one-third of all households, provide one-half of family income and food production, and perform two-thirds of all working hours. And yet, women receive only one-tenth of the world's income; less than one-third of women are literate, and in many African and Asian countries only one in ten females even enters school. Four times as many malnourished children are female, and their mortality rate is 40 percent higher. Only one in 100 women owns land.

What creates these conditions?

Women in the rural areas of the Third World are subject to a triple oppression: as citizens of underdeveloped countries; as peasants, living in the most impoverished and disadvantaged areas of those countries; and as women in male-dominated societies. Their struggle is not for equality, but for survival. Women are in charge of the daily domestic chores and responsible for the health and well-being of their children. Most women have to travel long distances to gather scarce fuel and water. But they also work in the fields. They produce food, sell surpluses in the market, and tend livestock.

Poverty compounds the disadvantages of womanhood. Poor rural families must have cash to purchase basic commodities — salt, kerosene, tea, sugar. When men migrate from their villages in search of work, the burden of supporting entire families falls on women.

Women are indeed active participants in the economies of Third World countries. Yet when it

comes to gathering statistics on them, they are not recorded as "productive labor" or "part of the national workforce!" Many of the development programs aimed at providing assistance, in fact, exclude women. For the poor and landless who have depended on weeding and harvesting for an income, the advent of tractors and herbicides results in the loss of jobs. Similarly, the traditional occupations for women, crafts that can be produced at home, have been rendered obsolete by synthetics and factory-made products. Sometimes development programs have provided alternative employment for male laborers, but rarely for women. When women do find work outside the home, they are given the worst jobs and paid the least. To be housekeeper, mother, wife and laborer, means for poor women, working longer and harder than anyone else in the family.

Typical of programs which have addressed women in recent decades is the evening health or literacy class. Even after twelve hours of exhausting physical labor, the children tugging at their skirts, women have attended. But they soon discover that courses in nutrition are of no interest if they cannot afford the new ingredients. Similarly, reading is a luxury to a mother with a sick or hungry child.

In recent years, poor women have begun to speak out and express their felt needs. We have learned that a poor woman's first need is to have greater opportunities for employment. To enable women to participate in the development process, Oxfam America supports projects which increase their employment opportunities. This involves improving traditional occupations or introducing new ones. Through such income-generating activities, women are no longer "acted upon," but take action to change their own lives.

Strategies for change

Six basic strategies are at the heart of women's programs: 1) removing barriers to financial credit, 2) access to technology, 3) training, 4) management and marketing skills, 5) health and day care services, and 6) the formation of women's support groups.

Credit. Loans for raw materials and equipment can free poor women from perpetual cycles of indebtedness. However, banks aren't willing to give loans to people without title to land or other collateral. They are even less likely to give credit to a woman who can't sign her name or add a column. In India, where village brokers charge as much as 120 percent annual interest, a number of key groups have been organized around providing credit to poor women — several with help from Oxfam America. The provision of seed capital — for a dairy buffalo, a maize grinder, or seeds — have enabled women to invest in their families' futures.

Access to Technology. Productivity can be increased and physical hardships minimized if appropriate technology is made available. The introduction of spinning machines in Sursand, India, smokeless stoves in Guatemala or solar water pumps in Somalia have eased the burden on women and improved the livelihood of many families.

Bolivia, OA photo

Training. The universal practice of placing a lesser importance on education for girls means that women have fewer opportunities to get job training. Whether it is to learn totally new skills or adapt modern agricultural and animal husbandry practices, we have observed that the least educated and least confident women will step forward if training is likely to lead them to greater self-reliance.

Management and marketing skills. Improved technical skills must be taught in conjunction with management and marketing skills. The women of Nasarapur in India make lace every day of their lives from age six onwards, but earn as little as a dime per day for their efforts. To overcome exploitation by the middlemen who buy, piece together and market their goods, the lacemakers must understand the market and manage their own cooperative.

Health and day care services. Staggering infant mortality rates and chronic malnutrition are evidence of the lack of access to and prohibitive costs of rural health care. While some mothers have found ways of using local affordable resources to form a healthy staple diet for their children, many fall short of minimum requirements. And since child care programs are rarely available, mothers often must bring their babies with them to work. Rural women's production groups and cooperatives are making health and nutrition training available. One such local group, the Canipaco Valley Women's Project in Peru, is using an innovative approach — comic-book style lessons — to make sense out of science. Women groups are also providing day care centers which serve a double function: first to create a healthy environment for children so that mothers can pursue employment opportunities, and secondly, to serve as the focal point for women to meet and discuss shared concerns.

Women's support groups. Throughout the world, the status and role of women vary from region to region, but the fact of male chauvinism does not. Experience reveals that poor women are able to do more for themselves and their families when they organize with other women. Change will come through female initiative as women's greater participation in development efforts demonstrates the importance of their contribution. "I think a lot of our women, because of joining an organization, their own strength is coming out — and it's sort of a process; other people see our strength coming out and then they give us support." (Indian woman)

Another successful story

"Women are the foundation upon which the universe is built."

Malian proverb

Kadidia lives in Markala, a town of 8,000 people on the Niger River in Mali, West Africa. She is 36 years old and has 6 children. Like most women in Mali, Kadidia works very hard. She is responsible for purchasing the family's main meal of the day, as well as their clothing, medicines and school supplies.

But, as is the case with the majority of women in Mali, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Kadidia to fulfill these responsibilities. Kadidia needs cash to provide for her family. Her husband's migration to cotton plantations and rising inflation have made the need for cash a source of daily anxiety. Her family's hardship is increased by the still-felt effects of the 1968-74 Sahelian drought and by the government's policy of producing cotton and peanuts at the expense of food crops. Kadidia needs more than $50 a month to buy the basic necessities. However, there are few income-generating possibilities for women in Markala.

There is a saying in Mali that "being a woman is not a tragedy; but being a failure as a woman, that is a tragedy." Moved by this belief and her own strength and determination, Kadidia decided to help herself. In 1975, together with 19 other women from Markala, she started the Markala Women's Cooperative. The main activity they adopted was the dyeing and sale of cotton cloth. Subsequently, soap became an important second product, made from raw materials that are available in the area and easily sold on the local market.

Between 1975 and 1982, 32 more women joined the Markala Women's Cooperative, and there are as many more on the waiting list. The members run the cooperative themselves and everyone earns the same basic salary. They work between five and six hours a day, according to a flexible schedule fitted around their domestic chores.

The women are proud of the considerable achievements they have made so far: through a series of training programs they have perfected their skills, and now produce lengths of beautifully tie-dyed and hand-painted cloth, as well as good quality laundry soap which competes with imported products.

These are what the members of the cooperative have said about their accomplishments:

"We have learned many things other women don't know how to do."

"Before I had no trade. Now I am able to meet my expenses. I can tie cloth or make soap at home at night."

"Being in a group is really helpful for one's worries. We know one another and help one another."

Oxfam America too, is proud of their success — and of their courage and determination. We provided $24,000 for working capital and a fund to cover the women's salaries until they could bring their products to market. The Markala Women's Cooperative is only one of the 25 women's projects Oxfam America supports across Asia, Africa and Latin America. We are helping women help themselves to a brighter future for their families.

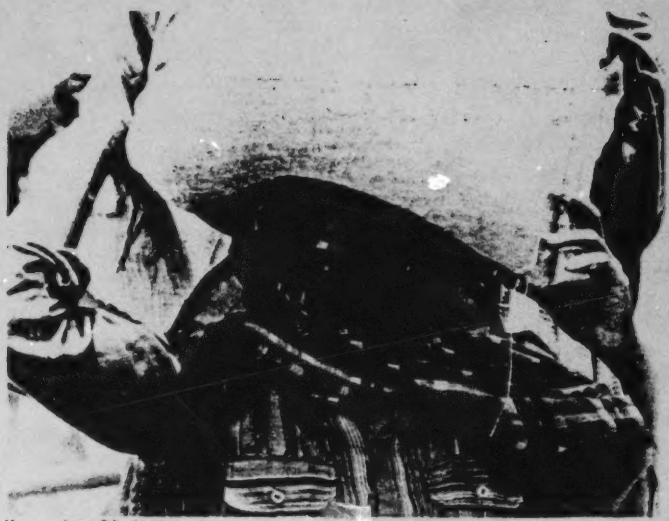
Leslie Tuttle &
Haleh Wunder,
Oxfam America Staff

India, FAO photo

Oxfam America

Zimbabwe. OA photo

Nicaragua. OA photo



Kampuchea. OA photo

Upper Volta. UN photo

Bangladesh. FAO photo

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Ideas for Action

Form a study group to explore the issues of women's participation in the development process. Select a facilitator and use the above reading list in your discussions. You want to sharpen each person's understanding of the issues and ability to articulate them.

Form a small group to investigate the conditions and needs of poor women in your own community. Talk to poor women directly. Food banks and soup kitchens also provide good information on local poverty and what individuals can do. Share your findings and suggestions with your local newspaper(s) and Congressional representatives. Contact Oxfam America for guidelines on writing articles and letters to newspaper editors.

Organize a fund-raising/consciousness-raising event in your community. Use the money you raise to support Oxfam America's women's projects in the Third World.

Two good audio-visuals on women's issues are:

The Double Day. Produced by the International Women's Film Project. Analyzes the working conditions of Latin American women. Available from UNIFILM, 419 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016 or 1560 Bryant Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.

Small Intervention: The Role of Women in India's Development. A slide-tape presentation produced by and available from Oxfam America.

Kampuchea. OA photo

Further Reading:

The Exchange, **The Exchange Report: Women in the Third World.** New York, NY: The Exchange, 1981. 80 pp. $6.00. Available from The Exchange, 26 East 22nd Street, New York, NY 10010.

Jain, Devaki, **Women's Quest for Power: Five Case Studies.** Sahibibad, India: Institute for Social Studies, 1980. 269 pp. $10.00 (hardcover). Available from Oxfam America.

Leghorn, Lisa and Mary Roodkowsky, **Who Really Starves? Women and World Hunger.** New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1977. 40 pp. $1.25. Available from Oxfam America.

Seeds. A pamphlet series about the positive experiences of poor women who are working to help themselves. Available from Seeds, P.O. Box 3923, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10017.

Turner, June H., **Latin American Women: The Meek Speak Out.** Silver Springs, MD: International Educational Development, Inc., 1980. 174 pp. $6.95. Available from Oxfam America.

Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, **Black Women in Zimbabwe.** Salisbury, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, 1981. 60 pp. $2.00. Available from Oxfam America.

Honduras. UNHCR photo

Oxfam America is an international development and disaster relief organization based in Boston. Oxfam America was founded in 1970 and is one of six autonomous Oxfams, including two in Canada and one each in Great Britain, Australia and Belgium. The name "Oxfam" came from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded in England in 1942. Building self-reliance is our most important goal. We fund local, grassroots groups in 21 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the United States, Oxfam America works to inform policymakers and the general public about the root causes of world hunger and poverty. Oxfam America neither seeks nor accepts government funds, but relies entirely upon private institutions and citizens.